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# TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE....

## A Column on Consumer Issues

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### **Be Alert to Midway Cons**

County fairs and traveling carnival shows can be lots of fun, but be wary if you try to play the midway amusement games. Many of these games seem simple to play, but they can be easily rigged. Unscrupulous midway operators commonly let people win occasionally to encourage others to try, but then fix the game to rip off the gullible.

The same carnival games resurface every year. One game, the pop bottle roll, is simple for the operator to make the game either easy to win or impossible to win. In this game, two pop bottles are placed side-by-side. The player must roll a lightweight softball down a platform to knock over both bottles. The only way this game can be won is if the ball hits both bottles solidly at the same time. The game operator can ensure a losing roll by setting one of the bottles slightly ahead of the other. The ball then will hit one bottle first, absorbing most of the ball's energy, and eliminating any chance it will have enough power left to knock over the second bottle.

The "pin game" is another bowling-style game that is easy to fix. In the pin game, players get two rolls of a ball down a small wooden alley. Five pins are placed in two rows at the end of the alley, but they are carefully spaced so that it is impossible to knock down more than four of the five pins with the two rolls. When midway con artists demonstrate the game, they casually knock down the fifth pin with a brush of their hand as they follow through with their roll.

Basket toss games are also easy to fix. This game requires players to toss a ball into a slanted peach basket. It is nearly impossible to keep a ball in the basket, however, because of how the basket is made and perched. To demonstrate the game, operators place a second ball in the basket to deaden the bounce created by the bottom of the basket. That second ball is removed when you try to play.

Not all midway games are rigged, but some are. Experts say you should be very careful around games that seem very easy to play. Also, be watchful of big stuffed animals being promoted as prizes. Such big prizes are being offered solely to get your attention. How could a midway operator stay in business if everyone won? Be careful, too, if you win when the operator gives you some practice attempts, but you lose when you pay to play.

Group games at midways, where you compete against other players and not the operator, are more likely to be legitimate. The size of the prize often depends on the number of players competing, but at least you know you have the same chance of winning as the other players. By law, midway games must be conducted in an honest, fair manner. You must

have a legitimate chance to win, although the odds of winning vary widely from game to game. Although seen by most as a harmless summer activity,

midway games can involve a lot of money. Under North Dakota law, operators can charge up to \$5 to play any midway amusement game, but cannot give cash prizes exceeding \$5. That is why most midway operators give only merchandise prizes to people who win at their games.

If you believe you have been conned, contact your county sheriff's office immediately.

*The Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division investigates allegations of fraud in the marketplace. Investigators also mediate individual complaints against businesses. If you have a consumer problem or question, call the Consumer Protection Division at 328-3404, toll-free at 1-800-472-2600, or 1-800-366-6888 (w/TTY). This article and other consumer information is located on our website at [www.ag.state.nd.us](http://www.ag.state.nd.us).*